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Understanding University Educator's Pedagogical Preferences and Perceptions: A Qualitative Inquiry into Teaching Beliefs and Practice

Fareha Asif [1] Ambreen Akhtar Rathore [2] Fiza Ejaz [3] Alina Fatima Siddiqui [4]

[1] Lecturer, Department of Psychology. Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hamdard University Karachi Pakistan. Email: Fareha.asif@hamdard.edu.pk (Corresponding Author)
[2] Lecturer, Department of Psychology. Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hamdard University Karachi Pakistan. Email: Ambreen.akhtar@hamdard.edu.pk
[3] Lecturer, Department of Psychology. Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hamdard University Karachi Pakistan. Email: Fiza.Ejaz@hamdard.edu.pk
[4] Lecturer, Department of Psychology. Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hamdard University Karachi Pakistan. Email: Alina.fatima@hamdard.edu.pk

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores university educators' preferences for specific pedagogical approaches and their underlying beliefs, motivations, and challenges. Using semi-structured interviews with twelve educators from diverse institutional backgrounds, the research uncovers how teaching preferences are shaped by experiential, cognitive, and contextual factors. Thematic analysis revealed that while lectures remain widely used, many educators favor interactive and student-centered strategies such as hands-on learning, cross-questioning, feedback loops, and case-based instruction. Motivations for these preferences included the desire to foster critical thinking, improve comprehension, and enhance student satisfaction. Educators' beliefs reflected confidence in the transferability of global pedagogies and the importance of tailoring instruction to diverse learners. However, significant challenges—such as lack of resources, large class sizes, technological barriers, and institutional resistance—were also reported. The findings highlight the need for pedagogical development initiatives that are aligned with educators' lived experiences and support both innovation and instructional autonomy.

Keywords: pedagogical preferences, teaching beliefs, higher education, qualitative research, instructional strategies, educator motivation, teaching challenges

Introduction

The quality of instruction in higher education depends not only on the pedagogical models adopted by institutions, but also on the individual beliefs, preferences, and values of educators. While much of the discourse on teaching in universities emphasizes policy reform and instructional design, relatively less attention has been given to how educators themselves conceptualize pedagogy, why they prefer certain approaches over others, how their beliefs shape practice, and what challenges they encounter when implementing these strategies.

Pedagogical preferences are deeply intertwined with teachers' professional identity, prior experiences, and contextual realities. Research suggests that educators do not passively adopt prescribed instructional models; rather, they interpret, modify, and sometimes resist pedagogical frameworks based on their own teaching philosophies (Fang, 1996; Pajares, 1992). These preferences, in turn, influence how lessons are delivered, how students engage with material, and what learning outcomes

are emphasized. Understanding these preferences is therefore essential for both instructional improvement and teacher development.

Equally important are the **attitudes and perceptions** educators hold toward different pedagogical approaches. These may be informed by cultural expectations, discipline-specific norms, exposure to global teaching practices, and beliefs about students' capabilities and learning needs. As Korthagen (2010) notes, teaching is as much a values-based profession as it is a technical one, and examining what teachers believe about learning reveals critical insight into how they teach.

Moreover, while existing literature often focuses on idealized pedagogical models, educators face a range of **real-world challenges** in applying their preferred methods. Constraints such as limited institutional support, large student numbers, insufficient resources, and technological barriers can all limit the feasibility of innovative or student-centered approaches (Wubbels, 2011). In this context, understanding how educators navigate these challenges is essential for building practical, context-sensitive frameworks for pedagogical reform.

The present study addresses these gaps by investigating:

- The pedagogical approaches university educators prefer and the reasons behind their choices.
- The beliefs, motivations, and perceived challenges educators associate with the use of different pedagogies.

Through a qualitative lens, this study seeks to amplify educators' voices and provide insight into how teaching preferences and perceptions shape instructional practice in higher education. The findings contribute to ongoing efforts to humanize and contextualize pedagogy by grounding it in the lived experiences of those who implement it daily.

Methodology

Research Design

This study followed a **qualitative research design** grounded in a constructivist epistemology. The aim was to understand how educators make sense of their pedagogical choices and challenges through interpretive, experience-driven accounts. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect rich, narrative data. **Reflexive Thematic Analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006) provided the analytic framework to identify patterns, categories, and meaning-making processes across the data set.

Participants

A total of **twelve educators** participated in the study. They were selected using purposive sampling to ensure variation in teaching experience and institutional affiliation. Six educators had 1–5 years of teaching experience, while six had 6+ years. All were currently teaching in higher education and had not taken a professional break exceeding one year. Only those engaged in **in-person teaching** were included in order to ensure contextual consistency.

Data Collection

Data were collected through **semi-structured interviews**, conducted in-person or telephonically based on participant availability. Interviews followed a flexible guide that explored participants' preferred teaching strategies, their beliefs and motivations, their experiences with diverse learners, and the obstacles they encountered in pedagogy. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each and were audio-recorded with participant consent.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's six-step model. Transcripts were read and re-read for familiarization, initial codes were generated, and themes were constructed based on recurrent ideas. To enhance rigor, the coding process was reviewed in two rounds by PhD-level scholars. **Latent coding** was used to identify not just what was said, but the underlying meanings and

patterns. Quasi-quantitative data (e.g., "4 out of 12 educators") are used to support thematic frequency where relevant.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's institution. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose and their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. All data were used solely for academic purposes and stored securely.

Findings

The findings are organized according to the two research objectives. The first section explores teachers' preferences for specific pedagogical approaches and their reasons for these preferences. The second examines their underlying beliefs, motivations, and the challenges they face in applying pedagogies.

Teachers' Preferences for Pedagogical Approaches

Educators reported a variety of preferred teaching methods, ranging from traditional lectures to more interactive, experiential approaches. While lectures remained the most widely used strategy, many educators expressed a strong preference for active and student-centered methods such as hands-on training, feedback mechanisms, and cross-questioning. These choices were often driven by perceived student engagement, conceptual clarity, and real-world applicability.

Table 1

Preferred Pedagogical Approaches Among Educators (N = 12)

Preferred Approach	No. of Educators	% of Sample
Lecturing	10	83%
Hands-On Training	4	33%
Feedback (Two-Way)	6	50%
Cross-Questioning	3	25%
After-Class Discussion	3	25%
Case Study Method	7	58%

Theme 1: Hands-On Training

Many educators highlighted the value of experiential learning. They emphasized that real-life relevance deepens understanding and builds application skills:

"Students learn best jab wo practical experiences se relate karte."

(Students learn best when they relate their learning to practical experiences.)

— Educator 4, personal communication, 2024

This method was particularly popular for practical disciplines, where abstract theory alone could not meet learning needs. Educators perceived this approach as enhancing retention and student motivation.

Theme 2: Cross-Questioning

Several educators mentioned using cross-questioning as a way to keep students alert and ensure real-time comprehension:

"Students actively participate karein."

(Students actively participate.)

— Educator 7, personal communication, 2024

"Bachay khud uspe involve ho rahe hote hain."

(Students get involved on their own.)

Cross-questioning was also viewed as a tool to foster dialogue, critical thinking, and peer learning.

Theme 3: Feedback-Oriented Teaching

Half the participants stressed the importance of seeking and using student feedback:
"Bachon se feedback leta hoon ke kahan mazeed improvement ki zarurat hai."
(I ask students where there is room for improvement.)
— Educator 9, personal communication, 2024
They viewed feedback as a two-way learning opportunity, helping both teacher and student grow in the learning process.

Theme 4: After-Class Discussions

Post-lecture interaction emerged as a tool for deeper learning and individualized support:
"Students aatey hain apna mazeed concept clear karte hain."
(Students come and clear their concepts after class.)
— Educator 2, personal communication, 2024
Educators emphasized that such informal interactions promoted trust and encouraged students to take responsibility for their learning.

Theme 5: Case Study Method

Many educators, particularly from professional disciplines, reported preferring real-life scenarios to stimulate problem-solving and decision-making:
"Asal zindagi ke maslay samajhne mein asani hoti hai."
(It helps in understanding real-life problems.)
Case-based learning was described as more engaging and thought-provoking, helping students bridge theory and practice.

Theme 6: Lecturing (With Enhancements)

Despite the growing interest in interactive approaches, traditional lecturing remained prevalent. Teachers reported modifying it with examples, stories, visuals, and humor:
"Simple and effective."
— Educator 1, personal communication, 2024
PowerPoint slides, relatable anecdotes, and language simplification were used to maintain attention and increase retention.

Educators' Perceptions: Beliefs, Motivations, and Challenges

This section explores the underlying perspectives shaping pedagogical practice. Three major themes emerged: **teacher motivation**, **teacher beliefs**, and **pedagogical challenges**. Each is discussed below in detail.

Theme 1: Motivation Behind Pedagogical Preferences

Educators described several motivating factors for choosing specific pedagogies, including student satisfaction, enhanced comprehension, classroom adaptability, and personal fulfillment:
"Mene bachon ke chehre pe satisfaction dekhi."
(I've seen satisfaction on students' faces.)
Some educators also mentioned that attending pedagogy courses encouraged them to diversify their teaching methods:
"At least yeh course karna chahiye... agar assessment se associate banna hai tou yeh course karna parega."
(This course should be done. If one wants to become an associate, they must take this course.)
Motivation was closely linked to a desire to meet diverse student needs, suggesting a student-centered orientation in pedagogical decision-making.

Theme 2: Core Teaching Beliefs

Many educators held strong beliefs about the replicability of successful pedagogies from global contexts:
"Pehle hum dekhte hain us ke results bahar ke mulkon mein kya hain."
(We first see how it performs in other countries.)

They believed effective pedagogy must foster not only understanding but also inquiry and critical thinking:
"Students not only understand concepts but also develop critical thinking."
These beliefs were rooted in a constructivist understanding of education; seeing students as active participants and meaning-makers.

Theme 3: Challenges in Applying Preferred Pedagogies

Despite positive attitudes, educators cited major barriers:

- **Resource unavailability** (especially in public institutions)
- **Technological gaps** (e.g., unreliable internet)
- **Large class sizes**
- **Resistance from senior faculty** (linked to generational differences)
- **Difficulty in catering to diverse learning styles**

"Kabhi kabhi saare resources available nahi hote."
(Sometimes not all resources are available.)
"Aap kuch naya karna chahein toh woh discourage karte hain."
(If you try something new, they discourage you.)
These constraints limited the practical use of student-centered or technology-based approaches. Teachers felt torn between ideal pedagogy and feasible pedagogy often compromising their preferences due to systemic limitations.

Discussion

This study provides insight into university educators' pedagogical preferences, beliefs, and challenges, offering a nuanced view of how teaching practices are shaped by both internal convictions and external constraints.

Preference Reflects Practice Shaped by Purpose

The findings reveal that educators tend to favor teaching approaches that support interaction, contextual application, and student involvement. Preferences such as case-based learning, cross-questioning, and hands-on training suggest a desire to move beyond passive content delivery. These choices align with constructivist pedagogy (Vygotsky, 1978; Piaget, 1970), which emphasizes active knowledge construction through engagement and collaboration.
Notably, even when educators did not use formal pedagogical terms, their choices reflected alignment with frameworks like **experiential learning** (Kolb, 1984) and **collaborative learning theory** (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). The strong preference for case studies among educators also reflects a **problem-based learning orientation**, especially common in applied disciplines. This reinforces the idea that teaching practices are often grounded in experience and logic rather than theory-driven design (Fang, 1996).
Despite a continued reliance on lectures, educators enhanced their delivery with examples, stories, and visual tools suggesting a hybrid teaching model where traditional structures are supplemented with student-centered tactics. This "pragmatic blend" reflects the realities of teaching in higher education, where educators seek a balance between engagement and feasibility (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Beliefs Rooted in Purpose, Not Pedagogical Jargon

Educators' attitudes toward pedagogy were deeply shaped by their **motivations**; a desire to enhance student learning, satisfaction, and adjustment. Teachers expressed confidence in their ability to select effective strategies, even if they lacked theoretical training. This is in line with literature on **practical pedagogical knowledge** (Shulman, 1987), which suggests that effective teaching often stems from accumulated classroom experience rather than formal education coursework.

Furthermore, the belief that successful international pedagogies can be adapted locally suggests an openness to innovation but one that is moderated by contextual realities. Teachers did not reject global models; rather, they filtered them through a lens of applicability and personal intuition. Their reflections echoed **reflective practitioner theory** (Schön, 1983), highlighting how educators constantly reinterpret their work to improve outcomes.

Motivation, Agency, and Adaptive Decision-Making

The motivational narratives uncovered in this study show how educators prioritize student comprehension, satisfaction, and emotional connection. These intrinsic goals mirror **humanistic educational values** (Rogers, 1969), which center the learner's needs, growth, and development as key teaching priorities.

Additionally, some teachers referenced institutional incentives such as promotions tied to pedagogical certification. This indicates that **extrinsic motivators** also play a role in shaping teaching choices — especially when linked to career progression. These dual motivational tracks (intrinsic and extrinsic) suggest the need for systems that both affirm educators' internal values and reward innovation through institutional support.

Navigating Challenges with Creativity and Constraint

While teachers demonstrated innovation in their preferences, they also reported systemic barriers that restricted pedagogical freedom. Lack of resources, generational resistance, unreliable infrastructure, and the diversity of student needs were repeatedly mentioned. These challenges resonate with prior studies highlighting the **implementation gap** between educational theory and classroom reality (Wubbels, 2011; Qadir & Hussain, 2022).

Importantly, these findings suggest that **pedagogical resistance** is not always a matter of unwillingness, but of practicality. Educators often function as **adaptive experts** (Hatano & Inagaki, 1986), making context-sensitive adjustments to their methods based on what is feasible, effective, and sustainable.

These challenges also indicate the importance of **institutional responsiveness**. When teachers innovate despite constraints, institutions should recognize and invest in their capacity — offering training, resources, and recognition. Faculty development initiatives should build upon what educators already do well, while scaffolding their practice with reflective tools and theoretical grounding.

Conclusion and Implications

This study highlights how university educators' pedagogical preferences and perceptions are shaped by a complex interplay of experience, belief, and institutional realities. While lectures remain dominant, there is strong enthusiasm for more interactive, student-centered strategies that enhance critical thinking and real-world application.

Educators are motivated by student engagement and satisfaction, and while their methods are often intuitive, they reflect sound educational principles. At the same time, challenges such as lack of resources and institutional inertia limit their ability to consistently apply preferred strategies.

The findings suggest several key implications:

- **For practice**: Institutions must offer **ongoing, practice-based pedagogical training** that respects educator autonomy and practical knowledge while introducing reflective, research-informed tools.
- **For policy**: Educational systems must prioritize the creation of **enabling environments** that support diverse pedagogical experimentation, especially through investment in infrastructure and recognition of teaching innovation.
- **For research**: Future studies could explore student perspectives on these pedagogical preferences, or examine how disciplinary differences influence teaching beliefs and challenges.

By listening to educators' voices, this study affirms that meaningful teaching reform must grow from within honoring the lived expertise of those who engage with students every day.

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